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RECORD OF THE BBC-FBIS AFRICAN BUREAU CHIEFS' CONFERENCE  
HELD ON 26, 27 SEPTEMBER, 1988 AT BBC MONITORING,  
CAVERSHAM PARK, READING

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Participants: [ ] Chief, FBIS London Bureau (chairman)  
[ ] Management Support Officer, BBC  
[ ] Head, BBC East Africa Unit  
[ ] , Chief, FBIS Abidjan Bureau  
[ ] , Chief, FBIS Mbabane Bureau  
[ ] Deputy Chief, FBIS London Bureau

Recorder: [ ] Chief Editor, FBIS London Bureau

Observers: [ ] Editor, BBC Part 4  
[ ] BBC Assistant Editor (News)  
[ ] FBIS Senior Associate Editor, London Bureau

The first session of the conference began at 1030 on 26 September 1988, with [ ] BBC Management Support Officer (MSO) welcoming the participating bureau chiefs.

Chief, London Bureau [ ] opened the conference by noting that while developments in Africa generally are not the primary concern of the United States, we do have clear interests in the region, particularly in southern Africa. C/LD said that we expect these interests to continue and, in spite of limited resources and technical problems encountered operating in the region, FBIS wants to continue to work together with BBC to improve services.

The morning session, dedicated to reviewing current staffing and technical developments at the bureaus, was led off by [ ] HEAU, with an overview of the unit at Nairobi. HEAU noted that from among the 19 monitors at the unit, 12 are full-timers trained for monitoring in two or more vernaculars as well as in English. As a result of a recent increase in monitoring time from 450 to 730 minutes/day, the Amharic team is under quite a strain, particularly when it has to cover elite mandatory texting material. HEAU called attention to the fact that the unit also had some French, Russian, Malagasy and Portuguese capability besides Swahili, Arabic, Amharic, Somali, Oromo, and Tigrigna. The five-man editorial staff is made up of expatriates and editors on attachment from Caversham since local nationals generally do not have sufficient command of English for such work. EAU's philosophy toward its consumers is "to provide them with what they need and no more;" the unit, of course, responds to requests for amplification.

The technical development of EAU is "largely in the future" and is subject to the vagaries of Kenyan bureaucracy. The unit expects to receive within a year two autostore-type multitrack recorders (11 tracks each) that will alleviate the existing cassette storage and retrieval problems. In

the meantime it has a severe broadcast retention problem as a result of measures taken to deal with cassette tape pilferage. It has secure storage for only 12 days of ordinary cassettes, but it tries to keep tapes likely to be queried, such as all Moscow casts, for approximately 60 days. The unit's 25-year-old antenna system is "baffling but it works." There are plans for the near future to improve amplification to provide a better signal. The unit is looking into the possibility of satellite reception of Ethiopian and Zairian television on Intelsat, but even if funds were readily available, Kenyan bureaucratic obstructionism could interminably delay placement of a dish. HEAU called attention to a new compact TVRO antenna -- "Squareial" (discussed in a recent issue of the Economist) -- that may provide improved reception generally lacking in a small unobtrusive dish.

Chief, Mbabane [ ] reported on Swaziland Bureau's capabilities, noting that its coverage area has mostly English language sources. The bureau's eleven-man monitorial complement currently has two vacancies in the Portuguese section. Besides Portuguese, the Bureau has a six-man Afrikaans section, some French and vernacular (Zulu, Ovambo, Siswati, Sisuthu) capability. At present there is no one to monitor Ndebele but very little is broadcast in the language. C/MB noted that while South African media is very tightly controlled, Umtata radio is more open and can provide interesting bits of information at times. Similarly, the English language press agency SAPA is less tightly controlled than the printed press and can provide uncensored stories, some of which may subsequently be killed upon censorial review. The bureau, with a complement of three staff and one part-time associate editor, puts out around 450,000 words per month.

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On the technical side, C/MB noted that the remote antenna site at Mt Kelly has not lived up to initial expectations of dramatically improved reception. Moreover, the site suffers from an exceedingly high incidence of lightning strikes that affect the equipment. The bureau's tenuous and complex communications lines are subject to frequent outages, the location and causes of which are difficult and time-consuming to pinpoint. The ideal solution would be to install a communications satellite relay at the bureau, but funds for such a costly project are unavailable. The bureau's sole backup is the telex, a somewhat unreliable but still usable alternative. The new IDD modem now being installed may provide increased reliability in the near future.

C/MB observed that the bureau has definite reception problems with Luanda, Harare and Lusaka radios, which are far away and tend to use low-powered transmitters. Reception of these stations is highly variable and is affected by propagation and weather conditions. Early next year the bureau hopes to have an independent contractor look at its antennas and recommend ways to improve reception. Although the bureau would like to push for a ROSET dish to improve press agency reception, given the existing budgetary constraints, installation of such a dish is unlikely in the near future. South African television reception is not a problem as Swazi TV relays the SA TV-1 signal and the Mt Kelly site receives SA TV-1 direct.

Angola is the biggest gap in MB's coverage. The main reason Luanda appears to be productive is that the station regularly rebroadcasts news throughout the day and monitors are able to piece stories together from

these repeats. The bureau receives ANGOP from what it believes to be a TASS feed but it is not the complete file. The new VOA transmitter in Gabarone is further complicating the already poor reception of Harare and Lusaka signals.

HEAU observed that unit has "holdover" weekend coverage of Maputo and now that MB is on 14 shifts/week there is no reason why EAU should cover. C/MB agreed but left it up to HEAU to decide whether they wished to continue covering it.

[ ] Chief Abidjan Bureau, focused his presentation mostly on technical issues. He noted that the bureau's twelve monitors, including one part-timer for "reverse translations," cover a large number of casts from over twenty countries. Many of these casts, however, are not very productive due to weak signals and poor reception conditions endemic to the tropics. The bureau receives six press agencies, several in French, which the editors tune and scan for fileworthy material. The monitorial staffing is stable and consists of local nationals resident in Ivory Coast.

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C/AB noted that an uninterrupted power supply unit is being installed to stabilize power surges which have been very hard on equipment. The next project is to rewire the entire bureau. This is expected to commence at the beginning of the new year, and will be done on the basis of recommendations provided by an outside consultant. Concurrently, the bureau engineer is reexamining the equipment line-up and rationalizing its distribution and antenna wiring throughout the bureau. Once the wiring work is done, a cruising monitor will visit the bureau to carry out an extensive survey. C/AB expects to be able to report on the results of these physical plant improvements and their effect on improving reception and coverage in about six months. The communications altroute is seriously affected by the weather and by problems at the local PTT. Telex has been out for months and PTT remains generally unresponsive. The new IDD modem arrangement promises some relief for backstopping communications.

AFP English service, currently received via HF, is scheduled to go to satellite in late December. Abidjan is coordinating with AFP to try to ensure that there will be no break in coverage, but it is possible that the phoneline connection may not be in place at the time of switchover to satellite. Abidjan believes it will be able to receive the English service without going through the Ivorian Press Agency (AIP), which currently supplies the AFP French service to the bureau. AIP claims exclusive dissemination rights for the French service in Ivory Coast. Whether FBIS will have to pay more for the English service is still to be determined in coordination with MOD and London Bureau. Abidjan would be interested in a ROSET, since it is known that Zaire, Nigeria, Niger and Gabon broadcasts are on satellite, but limited resources may preclude procuring the required equipment in the foreseeable future.

The afternoon session was dedicated to coverage issues. The three observers attended this session. The organization raising a given issue for discussion is identified in brackets following the particular topic.

Item A. Potential Cuts/Loadsharing Arising From Tight Budget Situation {FBIS}: C/LD noted that the word from Washington is that while resources are very tight -- and likely to get tighter -- FBIS has no intention to

reduce coverage or personnel. It is, however, possible that some vacant positions may go unfilled a little longer. It is quite certain that HQ is unlikely to entertain any new initiatives requiring large initial investments. FBIS will try to curtail its spending by cuts in travel expenses and in initiatives in the nonpersonal services area. Loadsharing may also be a viable option to fight the impact of tight finances. Bureaus may even be able to make small upgrades and improvements, but bureau automation is being put back a couple of years for several bureaus including Abidjan and Mbabane.

Some of the observers, who did not attend the morning session, asked questions concerning reception problems and planned improvements at Abidjan and Mbabane. C/AB responded by outlining the planned upgrades he already covered in detail during the earlier session. C/MB responded by stressing that reception problems at his bureau were the result of low-powered and poorly maintained transmitters as well as poor propagation conditions, and not due to equipment problems at the bureau. The possibility of remote operations, particularly from Harare, were discussed but rejected on the basis of high line costs (\$25K/year) and the unreliability of local telephone lines. C/MB also observed that South African authorities are very suspicious of bureau activities and even prevent the shipment of video recordings via air-express.

Item B. Sanaa {BBC}: Although strictly speaking not an African issue, it was agreed that the BBC-proposed swap of Jordan's Sanaa coverage for EAU's Aden Voice of Palestine was not a proper trade-off. JN has a real problem with Sanaa reception while it is sufficiently good at EAU to permit coverage. Aden has not been a very productive source recently. EAU is ready to take on Sanaa coverage whenever JN wants to give it up.

FBIS has some reservations in giving up Sanaa because LD editors are already over-burdened and EAU's monitoring of this station would put an additional load on them. FBIS at this point prefers not to make any changes but is prepared to examine the issue again at the spring coordination meeting. HEAU agreed to this but stressed that Nairobi is prepared to help out when there are reception problems at JN and that the latter should make direct contact with the unit. BBC has no objection to EAU and JN dealing directly (via telex or telephone) with each other so long as these exchanges are confirmed by a wirefiled message so that FBIS LD Editorial, the BBC Newsroom, and Part 4 are kept informed. HEAU noted that the unit has an Arabic monitor on duty at all times during normal working hours.

Item C. Addis/Lusaka (ANC Radio Freedom) {BBC}: In response to requests by HEAU and [ ] for increased coverage of ANC Radio Freedom, C/MB pointed out that this is not a separate radio but merely a program rebroadcast by several transmitters none of which are heard sufficiently well at MB to cover regularly. At this point MB cannot even confirm that the program is on the air.

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Item D. Madagascar in Malagasy {BBC}: MB cannot hear it, so EAU will cover.

Item E. Malawi {BBC}: C/MB said bureau is covering Blantyre radio adequately at this time but is prepared to increase coverage if developments warrant.

Item F. Zaire {BBC}: EAU hears Kinshasa radio only at 0500 GMT. Reception is so poor that the cast can only be traced but not processed. HEAU and C/AB agreed that each of them will file on merit whatever they can hear from Kinshasa.

The second and final day of the conference on 27 September began with further discussion of coverage and coordination issues.

Item A. PANA Coordination {FBIS}: EAU and AB agreed that EAU will continue to file PANA items pertaining to its coverage area while AB will cover for the rest of Africa, including southern Africa since MB can no longer receive PANA. Both will cover priority items for the entire area. EAU promised to investigate source and transmission mode of apparently consistently well received PANA file at the Kenya News Agency.

Item B. AB-EAU Coordination {FBIS}: In the interest of increased efficiency and better consolidation of African coverage, LD engineer will examine the feasibility of automatically relaying the EAU file to AB via LD without (or with minimal) intervention by LD editors or communicators.

Item D. Sudanese Coverage {FBIS}: Meeting participants recommended that, given its serious reception problems, JN should consider relinquishing SUNA coverage in favor of primary coverage at EAU. JN would continue to backstop SUNA for EAU whenever possible. LD Editorial favored this proposal to streamline coverage. C/LD bureau will coordinate with JN and Hqs to implement it.

Item E. Portuguese Staffing Problems in Mbabane {FBIS}: C/MB is seeking to obtain short-term TDY Portuguese monitorial assistance to tide bureau over period when experienced monitor is on leave and newly trained replacements have not yet come up to full speed. An alternative to the TDY arrangement is to ask EAU to pick up some weekend coverage for the duration. EAU offered to cover, if necessary, Maputo International Service and possibly Beira relaying Maputo.

General Discussion of FBIS Responsiveness to BBC and EAU Responsiveness to FBIS. C/LD conveyed to BBC a 7 Sep 88 memorandum for C/Ops Gp from C/AG entitled Coverage of Moscow Broadcasts to Africa. The memorandum aired C/AG's concern about the coverage of Soviet broadcasts to Africa which he perceives to be "falling short of meeting the needs" of AG both in terms of the "small number of commentaries processed and the frequently inadequate summaries provided" on the commentary lists. HEAU responded by noting that for quite some time now monitors and editors have been instructed to file more commentaries and slug items in greater detail. He promised to use this occasion to reiterate instructions which have already been issued on this subject. LD will also check with Tabulators to ensure that no important details are inadvertently omitted in the process of compiling commentary lists. At the same time, bureaus were in agreement on the desirability that AG explain the reasons for requesting a particular commentary or item so that the field can be more responsive to AG requirements.

BBC restated its standing economic reporting requirements and asked that FBIS remind the field of this. Similarly, the BBC Newsroom asked that

the field keep in mind their need for timely reportage and make greater use of higher precedence in filing material responsive to existing Newsroom requirements. BBC Part 4 also reiterated its preference for voice and primary source materials over press agency and secondary sources when these are available.

Finally, it was agreed that the following political and economic developments in the region warrant particularly close attention in the near future: the possible resolution of the problem of Namibia; the issues surrounding the economic recovery of Angola and Mozambique; and media treatment of the AIDS epidemic in Africa.

The Session was declared closed at 1600 GMT on 27 September 1988.

List of Action Items:

1. EAU to be entered into Field Coverage Schedule for daily class C coverage of Kinshasa 0500 GMT cast and Madagascar in Malagasy coverage.
2. LD engineer to examine feasibility of relaying the EAU file to AB via LD Bureau.
3. LD to propose to HQ and JN the transfer of SUNA primary coverage to EAU.
4. C/MB to advise EAU in the event that bureau needs assistance in Portuguese coverage from EAU.
5. EAU to reiterate AG need for more liberal filing of Moscow commentaries on Africa and for more detailed slugs. LD to advise Tabulators to expand description of Moscow items on Africa in commentary lists.
6. AG to be advised that bureaus would appreciate an explanation to accompany processing requests to ensure greater field responsiveness to AG needs. LD editors are to advise BBC Newsroom for relaying to EAU AG interests pertaining to that unit's coverage area.